

# Report: Tainted water no threat

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**LA CAÑADA FLINTRIDGE** — A new federal study states that water and soil contaminated with chemicals near Jet Propulsion Laboratory pose no public health hazard, a finding that endorses the NASA facility's Superfund cleanup efforts and could help it dodge an ongoing cancer lawsuit.

The report by a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services agency says that ground water near the lab is safe because water companies have monitored wells regularly and closed problem wells or treated and blended water to keep toxic water from making it to faucets.

"It was very good news for us to have an independent federal agency come in and review the data and come to this conclusion," said Charles Buril, JPL's manager of environmental affairs.

"The fact that it is coming to the conclusions that are basically being developed by our own consultants and staff gives me a better feeling that we actually are reviewing the data correctly."

Ground water at the JPL site in the upper Arroyo Seco never has been used for drinking, according to the report.

The report, set for public release Monday by the federal agency, states that it is unlikely that perchlorate, a chemical recently detected in water wells near JPL and elsewhere in the San Gabriel Valley, poses a public health hazard to JPL-area residents.

Perchlorate, a rocket fuel component, may cause thyroid and other health problems in certain dosages. There now are no state standards for perchlorate levels in drinking water and no known methods of removing it.

Nearly half the drinking water supplied to Pasadena residents by the city's Water and Power Department comes from the Raymond Basin, a 40-square-mile underground area fed by the Arroyo Seco that runs from JPL through Pasadena and surrounding communities.

JPL staffers have used chemicals in their operations since

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the late 1930s, according to the report, including chlorinated solvents, solid rocket-fuel propellants, cooling tower chemicals, sulfuric acid, Freon and mercury.

The report says JPL may have disposed of chemical waste in more than 40 cesspools between 1960 and 1963, when the lab installed a sewer system.

Those disposal areas are located under buildings, retaining walls, parking lots, roads and flower planters on the present lab campus. JPL now transports all hazardous waste off-site, the report says.

JPL has paid more than \$17 million so far for the Superfund cleanup, initially estimated to cost \$114 million over time — before the detection of perchlorate. The lab has never admitted blame for potentially cancer-causing compounds first detected in wells near the Arroyo Seco in 1980.

Water companies have closed down wells contaminated with volatile organic compounds in Pasadena and Altadena or diluted them with imported, cleaner water to keep them within limits allowed by state regulations.

In 1990, the Caltech-operated lab helped the city of Pasadena set up a water treatment plant for city wells closest to JPL to remove volatile organic compounds from that groundwater. That plant still is in operation.

Two years later, JPL was placed on the Environmental

Protection Agency's National Priority List of the most serious hazardous waste sites that require Superfund cleanups.

Last year, a group of area residents sued the laboratory for allegedly bringing on Hodgkin's disease in them or their relatives by dumping toxic chemicals in the Arroyo Seco.

Geologist and environmental health scientists W. Mark Weber of the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry visited JPL in the summer of 1997 to start the report by reviewing data JPL used for its Superfund evaluations.

In December, Weber and other officials also met with community members to learn their concerns.

The agency's review is a routine part of the Superfund process, Buril said. JPL shared all its archived data on toxic dumping with agency officials for the independent analysis, Buril said. Those data included groundwater and soil sample data tested for various chemicals.

Attorney Clifford Pearson, who represents plaintiffs suing JPL for 53 cases of cancer and other illnesses they claim are caused by contaminated ground water and soil, said he had only seen a summary of the report.

"We have many concerns about the summary, including statements which appear to be inaccurate based upon our own understanding of the facts," Pearson said.

"As an example, the statement that groundwater at the JPL site has never been used for drinking is one that we believe is inaccurate."

Four of Pearson's plaintiffs have died since October, he said. No trial date has been set.

Pearson's co-counsel in the

lawsuit, Thomas Girardi, was the lead attorney for a case in which a jury last week returned \$760 million in punitive damages to 38 past and present Lockheed workers found to have suffered harm from chemicals while building the stealth fighter in Burbank.

Buril said there has been no link between chemical exposure and Hodgkin's disease.

"Drinking water purveyors have always met drinking water standards set at the time," he said. "The public should have been protected at all times based on that kind of approach."

Superfund cleanups are long, arduous processes, involving an assessment of the problem and testing of possible cleanup approaches before removing environmental hazards.

Recently, JPL finished the field work for its remediation investigation and that report will be made public early next year, Buril said.

Next, JPL researchers will study an "ion-separation technique" for removing perchlorate from area ground water and another approach for removing vapor contaminants in soils. It is possible no cleanup will be done if researchers fail to find a good way to clean toxins out of area water.

Those results should be ready by the end of the year, Buril said. The federal investigators found hazardous vapors in shallow soil outside Building 107, where the lab's rovers such as were used on Mars are assembled. But there were no traces in the air in the building.

Buril said his team also investigated that site. "There is no concern whatsoever. We provided that data to (the federal agency)."